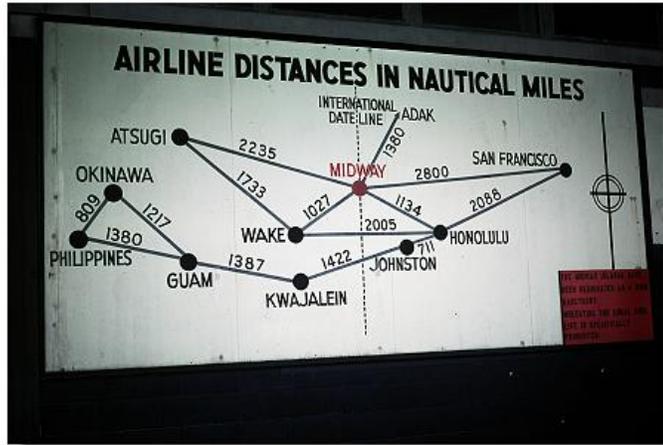


**NIXON/THIEU CONFERENCE – MIDWAY ISLAND June 8, 1969**

by Tom Helvig, CTCRM, USN (Ret.)

All through 1969, dissent and unrest in the U.S. was everywhere. The war in Vietnam had polarized the nation, racial tensions were building, and there was plenty of rioting and violence in the streets. So if you think about it, there was probably no better place to hold a presidential conference about Vietnam than on Midway Island... For a small island, it has often had it's share of world attention.



Mileage poster - Sand Island

1968/69

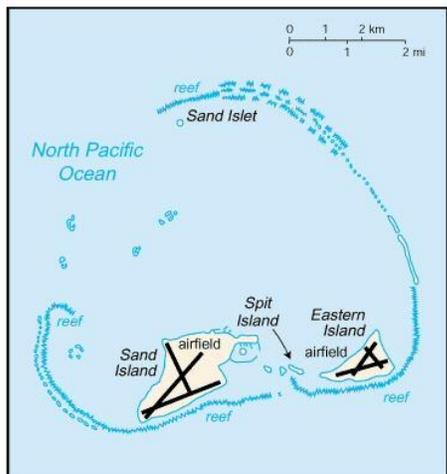
During the first days of June 1942, the Battle of Midway took over the world's headlines for the first time with a stunning US Navy victory over a vastly superior Japanese force. This battle left the Japanese with 4 aircraft carriers sunk, and was considered a turning point for the naval war in the Pacific. But in the years following the end of World War 2, only historians and scholars really gave much added thought to Midway Island.

But then again, in early June of 1969, and almost 27 years exactly to the day following the historic Battle of Midway, the eyes of the world once more turned toward this tiny island. It was on June 8, of 1969 that President Richard M. Nixon of the United States, and President Nguyen Van Thieu of Vietnam flew in to Midway for their first conference to discuss reducing our US presence in Vietnam. Along with their presidential staffs, reporters, photographers, and military contingents flown in from Hawaii, a few hundred Midway Island military personnel and their families had an opportunity to witness, and participate, in this historic event. It was an interesting day...



Sand Island

1968/69



Midway Island Map

When we use the word “small” in relation to the two main island areas that comprise Midway, we mean “small.” The total land area is only 6.2 square kilometers, or 3.85 miles. That’s it... about nine times the size of the Mall in Washington, DC. Plus, the terrain can easily be described as from low to nearly level. But for those of us fortunate to have had duty there, it was special in many different ways. Like having an opportunity to walk the beautiful white sand beaches every day, and to watch the many different green Japanese glass fish balls floating in (with and without netting.) And of course, the stunning Midway Island sunsets – enjoyed almost every day. It really was paradise

duty. So to discuss what it was like to live on Midway for 18 months, I'll share a few of my memories of duty on Midway, and refer to some old notes and Plan of the Day sheets that I kept from the Presidential conference and the days following.

The two main islands of Midway are known as "Sand" and "Eastern," and the Naval Security Group Activity operated from Eastern. The air base, main station activities, and family housing, were all located on Sand Island. In 1968 and 1969 "Eastern" consisted of an abandoned WW2 runway (which the goony birds constantly used to good advantage,)



many high antenna towers (seen in the photo) with steel cable guy wires of great hazard to the bird population, some isolated buildings, and a barracks for the NSG personnel. The barracks on Eastern would have made a great

Eastern Island with antenna farm

setting for an old WW2 jungle movie. Even the windows had to be propped open with sticks. I can also remember the sign that greeted us near the boat dock that read: "Eastern Island, population 43 men and two dogs." It was also in 1968, that the Navy directed the removal of these abandoned Eastern Island antennas. So the Naval Security Group detachment got to watch a visiting Navy UDT team do their stuff as they blasted down these antennas with C-4 plastic explosives.



Plastic Explosives - Eastern Island

1968/69

Our Naval Security Group operations building was located on the tip of Eastern, and visited 3 times a day by the "gray ghost," an old silver



Mike boat coming into Eastern Island

1968/69

P.X. panel truck that took the operations watch standers from the LCM "Mike" boat out the ops building, and then back again to the boat. The driver sat on a wooden



Mike Boat used between Sand and Eastern Islands

1968/69

box, and the crew all stood in the rear of the truck. Well, it wasn't fancy, but it did beat walking the runway and dodging Gooney bird takeoffs and landings. The married Naval Security Group men had their families on Sand Island, and we all took the "Mike" boat out

to Eastern each day. There are memories of rounding the jetty at Sand, the boat heeling over on rough days to take on green water, and the sharks and other colorful fish following the boat. Looking down from the dock on Eastern, the water was emerald green and usually very clear. Many a loaf of bread were dropped into those waters...

In late May of 1969, I received a call from my late friend and Leading Chief counterpart on Sand Island, Senior Chief Aviation Boatswain's Mate Jim McMullin. The call was to let me know that there was going to be a June 8th presidential meeting to be held on Midway Island, and both Jim and I had been

selected by the Base Commander, Captain A.S. Yesensky, to be drivers for President Nixon and President Thieu of Vietnam. He then went on to tell me that two White Lincoln Continental Limousines, a number of USN black and white sedans, and



Vehicles flown in for Nixon/Thieu meeting - Midway Islands

1969

ceremonial cannon were already on their way in from Honolulu. More cars were being flown in than were being used on the island! The main transportation on Midway was by bicycle, but if you lived on Midway, they were fondly called "Horses."

I was assigned to drive President Nguyen Van Thieu, and "possibly" to expect including Foreign Minister Tran Chanh Thanh and Bui Dem, the Ambassador to the United States. Jim was to drive President Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Jim also informed me that we needed to prepare at Eastern to take care of a few Sand Island troublemakers during the visit. They were to be quarantined on Eastern several hours prior to the arrivals, and not be returned to Sand until all visiting parties had left the island. Yes, we had a few troublemakers in 1969, even on Midway Island. The 20+ car "motorcade" was to follow behind our presidential limousines for a distance of about one half mile from the runway, and up to the Captain's Quarters where the meetings were to be held.

The hurry-up preparations for this historic event on Midway were really a bit comical. All the buildings on the motor route to the Captain's Quarters were to be painted, but only on the sides that could be seen from the road! All the shrubs were to be trimmed too, but only on the sides that could be seen from the road. Even the building windows were washed, but only on the sides seen from the road. Streets that had never seen a broom were suddenly hit with pressure hoses and teams with brooms to take care of cleaning away



CPO Quarters #8 - Sand Island

1968/69

thousands of accumulated bird droppings. All of the occupants of "CPO Row" housing were told to vacate their homes to be used for various presidential staff functions. Our family quarters at "CPO-8" was used by the Communications staff of the white house during the visit. When we returned home, you could not tell they had even been there.



Lineup for motorcade - Sand Island 8 June 1969

The two Lincoln Continental Limousines, and about 20 other cars, all arrived by air, and it is odd to describe how it felt to drive this big, beautiful car on Midway Island... All of the assigned drivers had a practice run for the event, and there were no speed concerns or traffic lights to worry about. If we even got the speedometer off the peg, I must have missed it.

President Nixon arrived on Midway Island first, and shortly after 10 a.m., on Sunday, June 8, 1969 was greeted by Captain Yesensky as the Marine Corps band from Pearl Harbor played "Ruffles and Flourishes." "Hail to the Chief" followed, and was punctuated by concussions of opening rounds and a 21-gun salute by five howitzers manned by the 29th Infantry Brigade, from Schofield Barracks in Hawaii.



President Thieu arrives - Sand Island 8 June 1969



President Nixon among the Midway families 8 June 1969

Shortly after President Nixon's arrival, President Thieu landed in a Pan American jet, with US and Vietnamese flags flying from each side of the cockpit. After full honors, the two Chief's of State inspected an honor guard of units from Midway, and a joint unit of Army, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard personnel from Pacific Headquarters, Honolulu.



USS Arlington June 1969

Although it was planned that each President would ride in his own limousine, President Thieu was invited to ride along with President Nixon to the Captain's Quarters, and this change of plans put National Security



In front of CO's quarters - Sand Island

8 June 1969



USS Arlington honor guard - Sand Island

8 June 1969

Adviser Henry Kissinger and members of his staff into the limo I was assigned to drive. Sailors from USS ARLINGTON, in sharp dress white uniforms, lined the street along the half-mile route. Other U.S. Officials followed the long motorcade, and they included: Secretary of State, William Rogers; Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird; Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, our U.S. Representative at the Paris Peace talks; Ambassador to the Republic of

Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, and the Commander in Chief Pacific, Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., whose son, now United States Senator John McCain, was at that time a prisoner of war in Vietnam. While the conference was underway at the Captain's Quarters, I had an opportunity to meet and speak with President Nixon's Son in law, David Eisenhower, and also with Rufus Youngblood of the Secret Service. Readers may recall that name, as it was Agent Rufus Youngblood that threw himself on top of then Vice-President Johnson in Dallas when President Kennedy was shot in November of 1963.



Presidents Thieu Nixon and US Naval Aide



CINPAC ADM McCain - Sand Island

8 June 1969

In true Midway Island fashion, the population turned out in their Sunday best to meet the dignitaries, and President Nixon walked up to

greet many of the personnel and family members waiting at the runway terminal building for the arrival of President Thieu. The media arrived about an hour before President Nixon, with a lot of familiar news personalities roaming the island and talking with the families. At 12:30 p.m., many of the Midway Island sailors and their families watched and snapped photos from their quarter's doorsteps, as the two Presidents strolled to the

Officer's Club for lunch. After the meeting, the Presidents issued their communiqués to a throng of reporters from outside the "O" Club, and who had traveled the long distances from Saigon and Washington, DC to report the news of this historic conference. Our local KMTB radio, provided Islanders with periodic reports throughout the day, and they carried the conference live from the station theater.

As a result of this meeting, President Nixon announced that the first withdrawal of 25,000



Nixon / Thieu statement

8 June 1969

American troops would start pulling out of Vietnam within 30 days, and be completed by the end of August. President Thieu spoke immediately after President Nixon, and told newsmen that the withdrawal was made possible by *"the improvement in South Vietnamese forces."* President Nixon mentioned three criteria as a basis for further withdrawals. He said they were *"first, the progress in training and equipping the South Vietnamese forces. Second, progress in the Paris peace talks. Third, the level of enemy activity."* Although this meeting on

Midway was their first as Chief's of State, it was later reported that Nixon and Thieu did have a friendship dating back to 1965.

Some interesting aspects of this historic visit were listed in the next Midway Naval Station Plan of the Day:

1. A total of 368 tons of equipment and supplies were flown in to Midway for the conference, with miles of lines and cable strung and checked by communications units.
2. The entire White House Press Corps of over 150 reporters and photographers landed on Midway Island.
3. Seventeen teletypes, 20 long distance phone lines, and a number of radio-photo machines were installed.
4. The EM Club was used as a press center.
5. The station theater was used for press conferences.
6. News film was flown to Honolulu on an A3D Skywarrior Jet and the film was beamed worldwide by Satellite that evening.

The Midway Island POD for all of the following week was of course, filled with "Bravo Zulu" messages from President Nixon, from the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, and from CINCPAC, Admiral John McCain. But on Friday, June 13, 1969, there was a final humorous note to the visit with this short POD entry... it read:

*"3. LOST: A South Vietnamese flag that must be returned to the White House is missing. It is about 3 by 4 feet and made of nylon and wool. Finder please return the flag to the Supply Department – no questions asked."*

~~~~~

A personal note...

36 years later, and thanks to the internet, I am still in contact with shipmates from Naval Security Group Detachments that served on Eastern Island through the years. Shipmates

like CTR1 Bob Pepper, who was assigned to Midway many years before I was. We talk about those days with fond memories, exchange photos and stories of Midway, and share the sadness of so many Midway shipmates now gone. It was also Bob Pepper that created the framing and titles for all of the photos that are seen here along with this “old” story. Thanks Bob.

Many names and faces flood back from 1968 and 1969... Welker, Morrison, Herring, Leach, Holt, Camblin, Brown, Knipschild, Swanson, Curran, Richter, Hoadley, Yates, McLean, McMullin, Foulks and many more not listed because my memory fails a bit. I have kicked myself many times for not keeping those old muster sheets, and I bet I'm not the only one... Sadly, a third of the shipmate names you read above are no longer with us...

I think we were a great team on Midway, and when the Naval Security Group I.G. team, unexpectedly flew in to Sand Island one day early in 1969, I remember getting another call from my buddy Jim McMullin with: *“Hey Tom – Guess who just flew in to visit with you guys today... They will be over on the next Mike boat!”* Because of our great NSG crew, we were absolutely prepared, and rewarded with a satisfying “Outstanding” for our operational readiness on Midway Island.



Eastern Island as it is today - 2005

Then, shortly after the NIXON/THIEU conference on Midway Island, Astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped on to the moon... 1969 was quite a year.